

Case Study 4

Leveraging professional expertise & liberating choice for career or personal development

Mils Hills

The MBA+ is a modern, differentiated and popular programme offered by Northampton Business School (a UK top 10 institution).

The MBA+ is offered in full-time, part-time, distance-learning and franchise partner modes. The author is the Programme Leader for the MBA+ by distance-learning, which itself is available as both a full MBA product and a 'top up' for students with a Level 7 extended diploma (or equivalent). Access to the MBA+ programme does not (importantly) depend on having a first degree, as we count managerial and other experience as equally qualifying. This briefing is written from my perspective as Module Leader for two elements of the MBA+ offering: a Critical Issues (10 credit) module and the Business Research Project (50 credits – 15,000 words).

Our students

The majority of our MBA distance-learning students come to us through having completed a Level 7 extended diploma with our excellent partner Stratford Business School. These students are primarily drawn from the British Army, typically being officers who have recently been commissioned after having served upwards of ten years in the armed forces. They may be transitioning towards leaving the army or may have several years of service remaining. Whatever the case, they have a significant amount of trade expertise (e.g. engineering, logistics, operations), a high level of commitment to their studies although often some anxiety about Masters study – specifically in relation to the Business Research Project, which requires secondary and (usually) primary research; literature review, analysis and synthesis over an extended period.

'The freedom Northampton Business School have allowed me to research and establish links between military leadership skills and those in demand in the boardroom during my MBA course work have only served to encourage me in my endeavour to compete for a role in business after 30 years of military service. For me it has created a necessary link between what I know and what I don't whilst I navigate a very difficult transition in my life' (Major Gary Ward, Company Commander, Royal Military Police)

Critical issues and business research project modules

The Critical Issues module is a small but high-impact one. It upskills students in some of the pervasive and challenging matters that business and other organisations have to contend with in the contemporary economic, political and social environment. We introduce concepts of change, risk, security, sustainability and new approaches to decision-making in organisations. We choose readings and audio-visual resources (provided through our Virtual Learning Environment) to stimulate and challenge. These materials are selected because they are accessible yet contain robust analysis: whether they are drawn from the Harvard Business Review, Royal Dutch Shell, the reinsurance house SwissRe or from more conventional academic sources – they are well-written (or presented).

The assignment for this Module is a brief essay. This requires students to select some concepts from the Module, discuss them and extract implications for leaders and organisations. In workshops to

introduce the assessment, online and telephone consultations with the students – we work hard to enable students to realise that they already know a good deal about these concepts and have a wide range of case studies from their lived experience that they can exploit in evidencing their reactions to the assignment title. Our armed forces students have been on Staff Courses which cover a wide range of geopolitical issues as well as theories of leadership and culture. Having worked in a large and complex organisation, and likely having been directly involved in deployments and operations overseas, they have insights which are both interesting to the assessing staff but also very compelling examples of concepts that we are teaching being applied (or not) in the real world.

‘Having spent over 20 years in the military, subject to a variety of different leadership and management styles throughout my career, it is reassuring that I have been able bring and learn from those experiences in the undertaking of my MBA. From my exposure to risk and its analysis in varying degrees from basic military operations up to and including ministerial level, I feel the experience I have gained more than compensates for what may be perceived as a lack in commercial and business acumen. It is however an area new to me and one which I now have an avid interest and thoroughly enjoy learning about. The freedom of choice to pursue the topics for my studies at my own pace (within reason), was pivotal in my decision to choosing Northampton University and definitely one which I would recommend to others. I now look forward to my transition to civilian life in the business world, not with trepidation nor apprehension, but with exciting anticipation of what opportunities lay ahead.’ (Mick, Warrant Officer, British Army)

What we realised was that most students were unaware that they were allowed to cite or build on their personal experiences – a situation which is common with our other MBA+ students, whether they work in commerce, local authorities, the Police service or, indeed, universities. Naturally, experiences have to be analysed in concert with what established practitioner and academic literatures have to say about the matters in hand – but they are a very rich source of ethnographic or Action Learning data.

Similarly, it is becoming increasingly important to support students (for both the extended project and the initial essay) as they seek to conduct research within the armed forces. The major changes to the size of and demands on, for example, the British Army, raise a wide range of challenges. Ensuring that capability can be maintained or extended; locating and retaining Reserve talent; growing motivation in stretched units and transforming from a predictable operational environment (e.g. Afghanistan) to a traditional contingency role (ready to handle a wide range of possible crises) are all issues which our students wrestle with on a daily basis.

We have encouraged students to undertake research both within their working environment (a classic Action Learning approach) as well as looking at analogous ones to see if there are lessons and ‘quick wins’ that can be gathered from commercial environments and injected into theirs. For the majority of students, then, this very applied approach to their study with us is attractive.

‘The combination of breadth from initial research, then a focused business research project is exactly what I wanted. I have also taken a BRP [Business Research Project] path that should provide valuable research to my employer, who ultimately contributes to the cost of my MBA and who would not have the manpower to conduct this research in place of this.’ (Steve, British Army)

They are able to leverage either or both the essay and the project to shed light on or, potentially, begin to solve problems that are part of their daily responsibility. Their academic studies are therefore integrated into their working lives and rather than having a major rupture between work / study – each helps the other. This is very useful when time is at a premium for busy army officers who are often covering more than one post (due to a shortage of personnel) and also have family lives and other commitments.

We have seen students produce excellent research which has been commissioned and welcomed by senior officers. The output of research has and is feeding directly into changes at unit / Regimental and doctrinal (e.g. Army Headquarters) levels. The range of topics is immense – ranging from very specialised aspects of the challenges posed by cyber-warfare, through to recruitment to elite military units and the use of lean approaches to improve the resolution of service complaints.

A good number of students have been liberated to pursue a different path. With a minimum level of service time of a decade, some students actively seek a non-military topic, or have been encouraged to see that their military experience can offer a good deal to the civilian world. Typically, these students are much closer to leaving the armed forces and are looking to develop a second career. We have worked closely with our students and understand that they often have very extensive networks of friends and acquaintances. This enables them to identify routes to individuals and institutions that many of us would struggle to access. Their academic work is therefore often around exploring a topic or issue that they have always wanted to research but have never had the opportunity to do so. Some of our students secure interviews with individuals who mere academics and journalists would never get access to. Suitably anonymised, projects have described how a leading City institution implemented new governance arrangements, for example.

Other students seized on our promotion of the use of the project to help friends with their business problems. One is exploring how a major car sales business can improve sales efficiency by applying British Army principles of 'mission command' (delegated authority). Still others have been licensed to use the business project as a vehicle to develop a business plan for a boardroom leadership consultancy offering. The project will require them to deploy all of their MBA skills to understand exactly how the business will envelop their abilities, brand and market itself, fit or fight with the current consultancy market, differentiate from rival offerings and learn from the successes and failures of similar businesses around the world. On completion of the project, the student will have both an MBA and a fully-evidenced business plan for the next stage of their career.

A final example of the personalisation of approach to assignments is that of a student who used the critical issues essay to explore the nature of risk and sustainability to his dream of transforming his hobby into a business. His hobby is breeding rare tropical fish. Usefully, but unfortunately, his analysis demonstrated that in order to maintain the style of living that he and his family have come to be accustomed – he would have to sell upwards of forty thousand fish a year. An alternative second career is now actively being explored.

Supporting an atypical student body

Northampton Business School is robust in instructing students that they can tailor their approach to the Critical Issues essay and the Business Research Project to fit to their needs. This is an unconventional and valued approach. When a student workshop is told that we don't set them a topic or apply suffocatingly tight criteria to how they approach their assignments – attendees visibly relax and a good deal of the stress and concern that characterises communications ahead of that meeting evaporates. We know that other institutions do not liberate their students to personalise, tailor their assignments in this way. But it is perfectly possible to extend this freedom and have robust academic foundations, the presence of extensive literature reviews, detailed analysis and synthesis with critical thinking and so on.

'As a full time British Army officer in a busy operational unit my study time is at a premium so having the flexibility and freedom to select topic titles that are relevant to my current position and potential future second career has been invaluable. [My supervisor's] wealth of knowledge, positive feedback and encouragement has allowed me to progress quickly and produce results far above my expectations. As a mature student having to fit my studies in around full time employment, having a tutor who responds so rapidly and professionally to requests for information and advice has been pivotal to my successful studies.' (Captain Guy Batchelor, British Army)

These freedoms need to be backed-up by assigning supervisors with, preferably, a background of expertise in a commercial or public sector organisation and a commitment to applied research. Northampton Business School is fortunate that we have a substantial pool of in-house and associate talent to draw on for this purpose. Given that our students are generally idea-rich but time poor, we embrace providing motivational, organisational and 'critical friend' support via email, on the telephone and in person – often at unusual times and in unusual locations. As the testimonials that illustrate this briefing indicate, this flexibility is vital – underpinned by the empathy of tutors for their students, the students' choice of topic and a commitment to fostering their intellectual curiosity and academic skills. The results are very heartening – with an excellent quality of

submitted work, assignments that markers enjoy reading and (most importantly) that make a real, transformative difference to the lives of our students. Impact is achieved in current roles and in the development of sustainable second careers – with emerging evidence that students would not have considered some of these careers without our influence.

‘Whilst studying for an MBA in your own time is a challenge; I write this in the Middle East following a short notice deployment, it is proving more valuable for my current career, and undoubtedly my next one, than I ever imagined. It is professionally and personally rewarding in three areas: in my current employment critical study of and around my professional experiences has added insight and 'the science behind the art', in looking ahead at my next career an understanding of the relevance my existing strengths and weaknesses) in relation to the business world is invaluable. Underpinning it all is the chance to develop academically at Master's level, building on my practical experiences and taking me out of my comfort zone, expanding my understanding and thinking critically - skills I am already utilising.’ (Ben, British Army Officer)